I never published my paper "Why There Are No Fresh Starts in Metaphysics Epsilon or Nicomachean Ethics III 5." However, pretty much all that paper got incorporated into my dissertation. So here are those sections of the dissertation, Epicurus on Reductionism, Determinism, and Freedom, UT-Austin, 1997.

Abstract:

Metaphysics Epsilon 2-3 and Nicomachean Ethics III 5 (1114b3-25) are often cited in favor of indeterminist interpretations of Aristotle. In Metaphysics Epsilon Aristotle denies that the coincidental has an aitia, and some (e.g., Sorabji) take this as a denial that coincidences have causes. In NE III 5 Aristotle says a person's actions and character must have their origin (arche) in the agent for him to be responsible for them. From this, some conclude that Aristotle thinks a person can be the uncaused cause of his actions, (e.g., Hardie, Ross), or at least that there must be some sort of break in the causal nexus, so that the person's character cannot be traced back to an external origin (Furley).

I argue that Metaphysics Epsilon does not show that Aristotle disbelieves in causal determinism, since he is dealing with issues of explanation in these passages, not causal necessitation. Metaphysics Epsilon 2-3 is not irrelevant to the controversy between compatibilist and incompatibilist interpretations of Aristotle, however. I will argue that a proper understanding of Metaphysics Epsilon's doctrine that the sumbebekos lacks an aitia sheds light on what Aristotle means in NE III 5 when he says that the voluntary must have an internal origin, and that it helps to show how one's action and character can have an 'internal origin' even if one's actions and character can be traced entirely to external causes. Finally, I will take this doctrine of the voluntary having an 'internal origin' and use it to illuminate Aristotle's discussion of the different types of excusing conditions in NE III 1.

3.321: Metaphysics Epsilon and "Fresh Starts"

As noted earlier, the discussion in De Int. 9 does not deal with the issue of causal determinism directly; instead, it focuses on logical issues. Nonetheless, because of the refutation of "logical" determinism in De Int. 9, some interpreters have looked for a denial of causal determinism elsewhere in Aristotle's corpus. One of the places most often cited for such a denial is Metaphysics Epsilon. For instance, Richard Sorabji says that "In this chapter of the Metaphysics... we can see him meeting determinism head on."^{119}

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This is because, in *Metaphysics* Epsilon, Aristotle seems to deny that the *συμβεβηκός* (accidental or coincidental) has a cause, and this is conjoined with the observation that the *συμβεβηκός* must exist, for otherwise everything would be necessary, which it is not. And in 1027b12-14, Aristotle discusses how a series of events may be go back to some coincidental starting-point (*archê*), which itself does not have a cause (*aitia*). This might seem to suggest that certain events simply occur, or are “fresh starts” in the world, without themselves having antecedent causes.

When looked at closely, however, Aristotle’s claim is much less startling than that. To deny that something has an *aitia* can mean either to say that it has no cause, or that it has no *explanation*. Aristotle means the latter. Aristotle talks about two different kinds of coincidences in *Meta.* 6. The first kind is a chance conjunction of items or events, *e.g.*, that a man who just ate spicy Mexican food happens to get killed at the well by muggers, or that a baker’s concoction happens to heal a disease. The second is the exception to a general rule, *e.g.*, that a freak snowstorm occurs in June. I will deal with each kind in turn.

In *Meta.* 6, Aristotle is concerned with what sorts of things can be the subjects of a science (*epistêmê*), and he says that coincidences cannot be the

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120 I favor the translation “coincidental” over accidental in most cases, for reasons which should become clear once the content of Aristotle’s doctrine has been laid out. I will use the translation “coincidental” for *συμβεβηκός* henceforward.

121 *Meta.* 6.3, 1027a29-b16.

122 *Meta.* 6.3. I have elaborated on Aristotle’s example somewhat.


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In order not to misunderstand what Aristotle means here, it is important to get straight on what he means by saying that such events cannot be *properly* explained. Aristotle is concerned with what sorts of events can be given an explanation by appealing to the principles of various sciences. For instance, that a house was built can be explained by appealing to a person’s knowledge of architecture, and that it is hot in June can be explained by appealing to the climate in the area.

So: a person eats spicy Mexican food, becomes thirsty, and goes to a well to drink, where there happen to be some ruffians hanging out who mug and kill him. Aristotle denies that this event has an *aitia*. Obviously, he cannot mean that his death has no cause, as the term is usually used. Of course his death had a cause—he got smashed on the head with a brick! Nor does he mean that it can be given no explanation whatsoever. We can say, for instance, that the man went to the well because he was thirsty, that the ruffians were there to watch a beautiful sunset, and that when the man showed up, they killed him because of their greed and viciousness. However, this does not mean that there can be a *proper* explanation of the event as a whole. There can be an explanation of event A, and of event B, but maybe not an explanation of the conjunction of events A and B, *e.g.*, we can explain why the man who just ate Mexican food went to the well, and we can explain why the ruffians were there, but it’s just a coincidence that they showed up at the well at the same time, because there is no unified science that can account
for this type of event, i.e., people-who-recently-ate-Mexican-food-being-killed-at-wells. Thus, whether an event is a coincidence or not depends on the sort of description under which it is placed, e.g., if the killing is put under the description “man-who-was-hit-over-the-head-repeatedly-with-a-brick-dying,” there could be a proper explanation of it.128

The other examples that Aristotle uses reinforce this point, e.g., when Aristotle says that the architect is not the aitia of all of the accidents of the house that he builds (e.g., that it happens to be 4,272 miles away from the grave of Mao Zedong,)129 obviously there is no mysterious “fresh start” that makes it the case that the house has this characteristic. There is no ontological import to the claim that the architect is not the aitia of this feature; Aristotle is simply describing what sorts of things can be given a systematic explanation. Maybe we cannot give a really good answer to the question, “why is this house exactly 4,272 miles away from the grave of Mao Zedong?” because it’s just a coincidence.

In the case of exceptions to general or “for-the-most-part” rules, it is not quite as obvious that there are no “fresh starts” as it is in the cases of coincidences; nonetheless, there is no reason to burden Aristotle with them in this case either. In June, we would not expect a snowstorm. But sometimes snowstorms do arrive in

June. Aristotle presumably does not think that this freak weather has no cause whatsoever, and that the storm is a “fresh start” in nature. He is simply saying that you cannot explain the snowstorm by saying, “Well, it’s June in Central Texas” in the same way that one could say, in order to explain a different snowstorm, “Well, it’s February in Northern Indiana.” The June snowstorm is weird, but it does not require one to postulate ontological “fresh starts,” but simply to acknowledge that any explanations based on probabilistic principles will have exceptions. Perhaps the June snowstorm can given some other explanation, e.g., there was recently a massive exchange of nuclear weapons and we’re now undergoing a nuclear winter, but is a freak when viewed under the description ‘June snowstorm in Central Texas.’

The discussion of whether τὸ συμβηκός has an aitia or not, then, appears irrelevant to the issue of causal determinism, since the dispute between the compatibilist and the libertarian is certainly not over whether human action is always explicable or not.130 Nonetheless, it will help us to understand another section of Aristotle’s writings that appears much more promising for those who wish to attribute to Aristotle a libertarian theory of agent-causation: his assertion,

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128 This may be what Aristotle has in mind when he says that “τὸ συμβηκός is only some sort of name.” (Met. 6.2 1026b13-14) Two interesting issues could be raised at this point; 1) Is “a man who just ate spicy Mexican food getting killed at the well” the same event as “a man who was hit over the head repeatedly with a brick-dying,” just described different ways, or are they different events? 2) Assuming that both descriptions pick out the same event, is one description of the event privileged as the “proper” description, or is this determined by entirely pragmatic considerations? I raise these questions, however, in order promptly to ignore them.

129 Met. 6.2 1026b13-14. Aristotle actually says that the builder is not the cause of the building being pleasing to some and harmful to others, but these examples are quite unfortunate, since it is part of the techNE of architecture to make a building pleasing to onlookers (although most examples of modern architecture may not support this claim).

130 Sorabji’s discussion of this point is particularly troubling. He starts off by discussing Metaphysics Epsilon ii by proclaiming that the chapter is extremely important for the controversy between libertarians and determinists, because “if, as I believe, Aristotle is right, the causal determinist loses one of his favorite premises, that whatever happens has a cause.” (Sorabji 1980, p. 4) But Sorabji quickly distinguishes between “cause” as explanation and “cause” as necessitation, and claims—correctly—that the Met. 6 discussion is focused on explanation, not necessitation. What the determinist believes, however, is that all human behavior is causally necessitated; what is needed for the libertarian case is not to show that coincidences are (in some way) inexplicable, although they may be necessitated, but that human behavior can be explained in terms of personal agency (or something of that sort), without a person’s behavior being necessitated. The Met. 6 thesis, therefore, gives no aid or comfort to the libertarian.
that, in order for a person to be held responsible for his actions, he must be the arché of his actions. So let us turn to this section next.131

3.322: The Nicomachean Ethics and “Fresh Starts”

David Furley argues that NE 3.5 (1106b3-25) shows that Aristotle believes that there are “fresh starts” in human conduct.132 In this section of the NE, Aristotle is considering some determinist arguments based on psychological determinism. What we do is based upon what appears good to us (as Aristotle himself admits), while what appears good to us is not under our control, but is determined by our character.133 Originally this argument is offered only as an excuse for wicked behavior, but Aristotle rightly notes that it would also exempt virtuous behavior from praise.134 Aristotle admits that some people are incorrigibly bad, because they have firmly fixed bad characters, and hence they cannot now control what appears good to them.135 If we are simply born with certain ideals and character traits, which determine what we do, then both virtue and vice would be involuntary, because then having a good or bad character would then be like having good or bad eyesight.136 Aristotle denies this, however, saying that, even if some people are incorrigibly bad now, at one time they had the ability to change their character, and hence they are still responsible for the evil actions that flow from their character.137 The voluntary, Aristotle tells us, must be “what has the origin (arché) in the agent himself when he knows the particulars that the action consists in.”138 And so our character must have an “internal origin” also, in order for us to be responsible for it: “[if we cannot refer [actions] back to other origins beyond those in ourselves, then it follows that whatever has its origin in us is itself up to us and voluntary.”139

Furley interprets this talk of the “arché being in us” in a particular way—the agent must be the causal origin, at some point, of his actions, without this in turn being traceable to previous causes outside the agent, such as his initial constitution, his environment, or his parents.140 And, although Furley does not explicitly mention “fresh starts,” his account would require some sort of break in the causal

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131 One final note about the interpretation of Meta. 6: Sorabji says that he cannot “follow Aristotle in his further conclusion that coincidences cannot be necessitated.” Given Sorabji’s use of the term necessitated, i.e., that there were sufficient conditions that made this state of affairs inevitable, I think that Sorabji is right that there can be necessitated coincidences, but I also think that he is misinterpreting what Aristotle means by necessitated here, Sorabji takes necessity to mean that there are sufficient conditions for a single event (or state of affairs), but this is not the only, or the usual, way Aristotle talks about necessity. Another way of talking about whether an event is necessary is to ask whether it is the sort of thing that inevitably occurs under a specified set of circumstances. For instance, I would not say that the hot weather in Central Texas today is necessary, even if there are sufficient conditions for its being hot today, because sometimes we do have a cold snap at this time of year. Aristotle’s way of talking about necessity in Book Epsilon appears to more closely approximate this way of talking about necessity. Aristotle says, “Since then, there are among existing things some which are inevitable and of necessity (not necessity in the sense of compulsion, but that by which we mean that it cannot be otherwise), and some which are not necessarily so, nor always, but usually: this is the principle and the explanation of the accidental.” (Meta. 6.2, 1026b28-33) Singular events cannot be “invariable” or “usually so,” only series or classes of events can have these characteristics. So when Aristotle says that the coincidental cannot be necessary, he probably does not mean that there cannot be sufficient conditions for the production of an individual coincidental event, but that, considered as a class, what happens coincidentally is not inevitable, e.g., it isn’t inevitable that all people who eat Mexican food die by violence, or every time a lake makes a pustule, it can turn disintegrated, or every day in the dog days is cold, etc.


133 NE 3.1114a31-b1.

134 NE 3.1114b13-17.

135 NE 3.1114a15-22.

136 NE 3.1114b 3-10.

137 NE 3.1114a20-30.

138 NE 3.1111a23.

139 NE 3.1113b20-21.

140 Furley (1967), p. 220: “The criterion of the voluntary act is not that it is “spontaneous” or “freely chosen”..., but that the source of the action cannot be traced back to something outside the agent.” Again, on p. 227: “[According to Aristotle] our dispositions cannot be traced back to sources outside ourselves.”
nexus, so that the person's character cannot in turn be traced back to an external origin. According to Furley, the function of the swerve for Epicurus is to provide such a break in the casual nexus so as to guarantee an internal archê of action.

Furley's interpretation of "the archê of the action being in us" is not satisfactory, however. First of all, as Furley admits, it saddles Aristotle with an inadequate theory. According to Furley, the voluntariness of an action depends on the voluntariness of an acquired character, and one's character in turn depends on the actions one performs earlier, which depend on one's earlier character. All Furley does is push the problem back a stage—how can these earlier actions be voluntary? Furley explicitly denies that Aristotle's action-theory involves "acts of free choice" or the like, so why is it easier to break the causal nexus at this earlier point than at the later one?

More importantly, there is no reason to take Aristotle's talk of the archê of the action being in us as meaning that there must be a "fresh start" somewhere, as we saw in the discussion of Metaphysics Epsilon. There, Aristotle claimed that coincidences do not have an aitia, and, at 1027b12-14, even said that a series of events goes back to some starting-point (archê), which itself does not have an aitia, parallel to his declaration at NE 3 1113b20-21. But in Metaphysics Epsilon, Aristotle certainly was not claiming that coincidences like the man being killed at the

well are uncaused. All he means to say is that subsequent events can be explained by appealing to the coincidence—hence, the coincidence is an archê—while the coincidence itself cannot be given a proper explanation—hence, it does not have an aitia.

Likewise, in NE 3, Aristotle does not mean that there cannot be antecedent causes that form our character. Aristotle is arguing against the notion that our character is entirely in-born, against which he asserts that a person's character is up to the person herself. Aristotle believes that our natural make-up affects our development, but does not normally fix our development. Hence, if we want to explain why a person has the character that she does, we cannot appeal simply to her original natural make-up, since people with the same natural make-up can develop quite different characters. Nor can we appeal to the person's parents, or environment, since these also do not fix what one's character will be like. The best way to explain a person's character is by appealing to the sorts of actions that the person has performed, since there is a reliable link between a person's actions and a person's character. People who act viciously become vicious; those who act virtuously become virtuous. Thus, it is "up to us" what sort of person we become, because our character depends on our actions, and our actions are the archê of who we are—but none of this implies "fresh starts" or breaks in the causal nexus of any kind, since Aristotle's concern with archê in this context is with explanation, not causation.

141 p. 235.
142 e.g., p. 191, p. 219.
144 Sorabji also points out that Aristotle often uses the word archê for one of several members of a causal chain, e.g., in NE VI 2, where deliberation and desire are the archê of deliberate choice (proristêta) (1139a32-33), deliberate choice is the archê of deliberate action (1139a31, 35), and deliberate action is the archê of events like sea battles. Sorabji (1980), p. 228.

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145 e.g., at NE 6 13, 1144b3, 7 5, 1148b18, 7 8, 1151a18, 10 9, 1179a31, Pol. 7 13, 1332a40-b11, 7 15, 1334b6; cited in Sorabji (1980), p. 231.

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3.323: NE 3 and Determinism

If the argument of the previous two sections is correct, there is no reason to attribute to Aristotle a doctrine of "fresh starts." either in Metaphysics Epsilon or in NE 3, despite the contention in De Int. 9 that not all things are due to necessity. More broadly, I believe that there is, at best, only an oblique connection between the anti-determinist argument of De Int. 9 and Aristotle's discussion of personal responsibility in NE 3. Although De Int. 9 is explicitly incompatibilist, this does not carry over to the discussion in NE 3, which entirely sidesteps the issue of determinism.

One reason for this disconnection is that De Int. 9 and NE 3 are simply dealing with different concerns. As noted above, Aristotle's worry in De Int. 9 is that, if logical determinism is true, then deliberation will be pointless. Issues of moral responsibility are not even mentioned. The discussion in NE 3, however, presupposes the efficacy of deliberation, and then inquires into what types of actions are properly subject to praise and blame. The efficacy of action is a necessary condition for any moral responsibility, so the two discussions do bear some relationship to one another. Nonetheless, they are separate topics. Because of the Master Argument or something like it, Aristotle sees logical determinism and efficacious deliberation as incompatible; however, it does not follow from this fact that Aristotle's thoughts about personal responsibility will fall along incompatibilist or modern libertarian lines. And indeed, when we look at NE 3, we see that they do not.

As Furley notes, in the discussion of personal responsibility in NE 3 Aristotle does not say that an action is voluntary because it is "freely chosen," or because it is preceded by "a free act of the will." Instead, as is well known, Aristotle defines the voluntary negatively, by first talking about which acts are involuntary—those that involve force or ignorance—and says that the others are voluntary, because in those cases, the arché of the action is the agent himself. And, if the criticisms of Furley in the previous section are correct, to call the agent the arché of his actions does not imply any break in the causal nexus, but simply means that the proper explanation for the person's behavior refers back primarily to his being the agent. Thus, Aristotle's discussion simply sidesteps the issue of whether there were sufficient antecedent conditions for what an agent did.

Indeed, the doctrine that the agent must be the arché of his actions in order to bear responsibility helps to shed a great deal of light on the discussion in NE 3, if by arché we mean what is appealed to in a proper explanation. In particular, which action a person is truly responsible for can vary, depending on the description under which it can be properly explained—this principle from Metaphysics Epsilon will help us to understand Aristotle's discussion of acts done in ignorance and "mixed" actions, as I will explain below.

In the NE, an agent is assumed to be responsible for his actions unless there is some excusing factor, either ignorance or force. In the discussion of ignorance, not all ignorance excuses, but only non-culpable ignorance about specific matters of fact. Consider the following three cases: 1) A man has an epileptic seizure and

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stabs his wife; 2) he stabs his wife, thinking in delusion that she is one of the furies and is about to kill him (for simplicity's sake, assume that it is a case of non-culpable ignorance. I will discuss the issue of culpable vs. non-culpable ignorance later); 3) he kills her in order to get the insurance policy that he took out two days ago. Aristotle would excuse the man in the first two cases, and condemn him in the third. We can see why when we look at what would be the proper explanation for the man's behavior in each case.

The question that needs to be answered is whether the explanation for the man's behavior appeals to the character, deliberations, and decisions of the agent, or to something external to the agent. Only in the third case would an explanation that refers to the character of the agent be satisfactory; in the others, such an explanation could not be given.

Let me explain myself more clearly. Somebody is told, "A man killed his wife." The natural question is "Why did he do it?" In the first case, the right answer would be "he had an epileptic seizure," and so the event under that description is "man-having-a-seizure-stabbing-his-wife," and when this is conjoined with information about the fact that his wife was nearby and that he happened to have a knife in his hand at the time, we would have a satisfactory explanation for the event in question. There may be no explanation of "man-with-epilepsy-stabbing-his-wife," but there is an explanation of "man-with-epilepsy-having-uncontrolled-and-violent-motor-activity," and this would explain his action when conjoined with the background information. And this explanation does not refer to anything about the man's character, or his deliberations, or his emotions. Thus, he cannot be held responsible for the action, since he is not its archè. 

In the case of the man with false beliefs, the act could be described as "Man-thinking-he-is-about-to-be-killed-by-fury-killing-his-wife," but that description does not satisfy our curiosity. We would still want to know why a man would kill his wife when thinking that he was about to be attacked by the furies. This could only be satisfied by the addition of the background information that he thought his wife was one of the furies, in which case the description of the event could be changed to "Man-killing-someone-he-thinks-is-about-to-attack-him," which we think would be a proper explanation of the event, if at least some details were filled in (for instance, he does not want to die and he can save himself by killing his attacker). This explanation would place responsibility for the action under that description upon the agent. However, making the agent responsible for the action under that description really exonerates him, because the action that he is responsible for is killing somebody that he believes (non-culpably) to be attacking him, which is not blameworthy. 

147 This is assuming that he is not being negligent by standing so close to his wife with a knife. But if this were the case, further explanation of the event could be given, which would re-introduce to a central place facts about the beliefs of the agent, e.g., that he knew that there was a great risk of killing his wife under these sorts of circumstances.

148 The same sort of story can be told about "mixed" actions, those done voluntarily but unwillingly. The action itself is voluntary, since the archè of the action is the person himself. But, just as in case of an action done through ignorance, we cannot understand why the person would do such a horrible action (i.e., we cannot explain why the person did what he did by citing his character, deliberations, etc.) until the description of the action is qualified, and it is for the action thus qualified that the person is responsible. The man is not responsible for the action of throwing the treasure overboard simplicer but for the action of trying to save his life and throwing treasure overboard in order to accomplish that. What Aristotle says supports this interpretation: "The person whose acts we are here considering acts voluntarily; for in acts like this the power which sets the machinery of his limb in motion is in himself, and when the origin of anything is in the person himself, it lies with him either to do it or not to do it. Such actions
In the third case, he is killing his wife because he wants to get money. In this case, an explanation can be given which is framed in terms of the agent's psychological structure and his decisions, without needing to change significantly the description of the action in ways that exonerate the agent. The action "Greedy-person-killing-in-order-to-get-money" is perfectly intelligible as is, and the explanation refers to the agent, his character, and his decisions.

This account entirely sidesteps the issues of libertarianism and compatibilism. If the proper terminus for the explanation of an action is in the deliberations of the agent and in his character, then he is responsible for his actions. Were there sufficient conditions determining his actions? This is irrelevant to the question at hand.